

Virgin's End: The Suppression of the York Marian Pageants

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IN FOURTEENTH-CENTURY York, the Corpus Christi Play served as an emblem of the city's power and prosperity.¹ Its production of pageants depicting biblical history from creation to doomsday, produced by the city's craft guilds, not only served its stated purpose as a religious festival, but also visually, aurally, and kinesthetically demonstrated the relative political and economic influence of the craft guilds that produced it. York flourished economically in the fourteenth century, and the robust labor market meant increased female participation in it.² But with the decline in York's economic fortunes over the course of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, women's status in the economy declined as well. The York Corpus Christi Play too saw its end in the late sixteenth century, though not all of the pageants were discontinued at the same time. The question that I will address here is, to what degree did women's affiliations with particular guilds contribute to the suppression of three of the Corpus Christi pageants almost two decades before the final performance of the play as a whole in 1569? Interestingly, it is the guilds with above average female participation, trades that employed higher numbers of women, that first saw their Corpus Christi pageants suppressed.³ These pageants, produced by the weavers, the drapers,

1. For purposes of clarity, the Corpus Christi Play as a whole will be referred to as "the play," and the plays performed by each guild, which make up the Corpus Christi Play, will be referred to as "pageants."

2. See P. J. P. Goldberg, *Women, Work, and Life Cycle in a Medieval Economy: Women in York and Yorkshire c. 1300-1520* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) for an examination of working women in England in the late medieval period.

3. The term "guild" or "fraternity" could refer to a wide range of associations from religious guilds, which could be quite small, to powerful merchant associations. Craft

and the hostillers, all depicted the life of the Virgin Mary.⁴ Certainly, with the advent of the English Reformation and its censure of Catholic idolatry, any pageant about the Virgin Mary was certain to come under greater scrutiny. And while this change in sanctioned religious ideals may have been the primary reason for the early suppression of these pageants, it is significant that these same pageants were also produced by guilds that not only had a higher female complement of workers than most of York's guilds but also were guilds that were experiencing economic reversals, which lessened their social status and thus their ability to defend their production of the pageants.

The York Corpus Christi Play

York's Corpus Christi Play, performed annually on Corpus Christi Day from the late fourteenth century through the mid-sixteenth century, long served to demonstrate the relative power and prestige of the city's craft guilds. Corpus Christi Day, first established in the thirteenth century to celebrate the Eucharist, was a moveable feast that occurred on the first Thursday after Trinity Sunday and was probably celebrated in York beginning in the early fourteenth century and celebrated in England well into the sixteenth century. The Corpus Christi procession predated the play by some time, as the feast of Corpus Christi was proclaimed in York in 1322 by Archbishop Melton and sometime shortly thereafter required a procession through the city with the Host accompanied by both the clergy and the townspeople of York.⁵ It was at some later

guilds were usually formed by workers of the same occupation to provide mutual support and to regulate the trade. For the purposes of this paper, I am considering not only official guild members but also those working in the craft more broadly. For a discussion of craft guilds in York, see Heather Swanson, *Medieval Artisans: an Urban Class in Late Medieval England* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 5-6. P. J. P. Goldberg argues that the craft guilds in York may have evolved in part in order to produce the Corpus Christi pageants; see "From Tableaux to Text: the York Corpus Christi Play ca. 1378-1428," *Viator* 43, no.2 (2012): 247-76, 256, doi: 10.1484/J.VIATOR.1.102713.

4. Drapers were specialized cloth merchants, usually of woolen goods. Hostillers were innkeepers and were often women, wives of merchants or other craftsmen, who kept inns or sold beer and victuals.

5. This meant that it usually fell between the May 23 and June 24. For more on

time that the play was added to this feast. The earliest evidence of the play's performance may be seen in a record listing the storage of three pageant wagons in 1376, and the first evidence of the involvement of the craft guilds in the play comes from 1386-87 in a document mentioning the Tailors' "pagyn de Corpore christi."⁶ Whether the early mentions of pageants refer to scripted performances or tableaux is unclear, but by 1399 there appears to have been a substantial performance as indicated by a city ordinance which regulated the times and places that the pageants were to have been performed. The *Ordo Paginarum* of 1415 lists the plays, the guilds that performed them, and a short description of each pageant's subject.⁷ The surviving copy of the plays was most likely assembled between 1463 and 1477 and demonstrates that the Corpus Christi Play was, in fact, not a single play but forty-eight pageants that told the story of Christian history from Creation to Doom.⁸ These pageants were

the establishment of the feast, see Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). This festival is still celebrated within the Catholic Church as well as in some Anglican Churches as the Day of Thanksgiving for the institution of Holy Communion. Goldberg notes that in 1366 Thomas de Bukton, an official of the Court of York, left five pounds to support the Corpus Christi "solemnity" celebrated each year in York. Goldberg argues that this demonstrates that by 1366 the procession was well established; see "From Tableaux to Text," 249.

6. The play was not always performed each year. It was occasionally canceled due to extraordinary circumstances such as plague and war, and sometimes the Pater Noster Play or Creed Play were substituted. See Alexandra F. Johnston, "The Plays of the Religious Guilds of York: The Creed Play and the Pater Noster Play," *Speculum* 50, no. 1 (1975): 55-90, doi, 10.2307/2856513, and Richard Beadle, ed., *The York Plays* (London: Edward Arnold, 1982), 20-27.

7. Alexandra F. Johnston and Margaret Rogerson, eds., *Records of Early English Drama: York*, 2 vols. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979), 1:11-12; hereafter, *REED York* 1. Note that Goldberg has argued for a gradual evolution from tableaux or short performances based on gesture rather than word to the pageants as recorded in the fifteenth century. Goldberg also notes that before the *Ordo Paginarum* of 1415, there are no references to the pageants concerning the Virgin Mary, Christ's adult ministry, or the fall—or to many of the Old Testament stories; see Goldberg, "Tableaux to Text," 247-76, and 257-58, and Beadle, *York Plays*, 24-26.

8. The manuscript containing the pageants is British Library MS Additional 35290. See Richard Beadle, "The York Cycle," in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, ed. Richard Beadle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 85-108, 90.

presented on wagons that moved through the city of York, stopping at twelve stations along the way. Each of the pageants was produced by a craft guild, and despite some complaining about the cost of supporting the play, the guilds seem to have seen the pageants as expressions of their own social standing. This is evident, for example, with the drapers of Beverley who formed their own guild, separate from the merchants and mercers, in 1493 because ‘itt is desyred by the drapers that thai shall be in clothyng by tham selfe; and to have a castell and a pageante os other occupacyons hase.’⁹ This illustrates that the pageant was seen by the drapers as an important expression of the guild’s standing.

The pageants themselves could also be used to express both the skill and the prestige of the sponsoring guild. It was certainly not incidental that the shipmakers presented the building of the Ark, nor that the mercers, the richest and most powerful guild in York, presented the Last Judgment. This final, and almost certainly most elaborate, of the pageants in the York play not only gave the mercers the “last word” in the play as a whole but also allowed them to demonstrate the wealth of their guild through its lavish production.

The Question of Women and their Roles in Performance

What role women played in the production of the York Corpus Christi play is a matter of debate. To date, we have no evidence that women acted in the medieval theatre, but a growing chorus of voices is suggesting that we have almost as little evidence denying female involvement in the theatre as we do evidence supporting it. In York, the fourteenth century saw a surge in women’s participation in civic life and an increase in their economic power.¹⁰ More women were involved in guilds, both religious and craft, a participation which seems to have carried over into the guilds’ dramatic activity as well. The evidence of female participation in the production of drama suggests that their role was one of backstage

9. Arthur Francis Leach, ed., *Beverley Town Documents*, Publications of the Selden Society, vol. 14 (London, 1900), 59.

10. See Goldberg, *Women, Work, and Life Cycle*, and P. J. P. Goldberg, “Women in Fifteenth-Century Town Life,” in *Towns and Townspeople in the Fifteenth Century*. ed. John A. F. Thomson (Wolfboro, NH: Alan Sutton, 1988), 107–27.

and economic support. Yet, to date, we have no evidence of women *performing* in the Corpus Christi Play.¹¹ Jeremy Goldberg argues that “the evidence that those acting in the gild drama of the Corpus Christi Play were, as with stage drama of the early modern era, exclusively male is slight, but it is an orthodoxy that is rarely challenged,” noting that evidence of male actors playing female roles is “also slight.” Regardless of the degree of their participation, it appears that women were involved with some of the guilds producing the York Corpus Christi Play.

The question regarding women, guilds, and the suppression of the Marian pageants is not tied, necessarily, to the question of whether women actually acted in the pageants that were produced. As Goldberg has argued, the evidence regarding whether or not women performed is slight. However, there does seem to be a growing body of evidence that suggests women participated in the *production* of civic drama. James Stokes, in his examination of Lincolnshire records, has found that “women were major, indeed co-equal, contributors in a variety of ways to the entertainments associated with traditional culture in Lincolnshire, a presence that can be documented at almost every level of society.”¹² While Stokes’s analysis of female participation in Lincolnshire cannot be assumed to be true in York as well, his findings illustrate that female

11. This is true for the performance of medieval drama throughout England, not only with respect to the Corpus Christi Play at York. See P. J. P. Goldberg, “Craft Guilds, The Corpus Christi Play and Civic Government,” in *The Government of Medieval York: Essays in Commemoration of the 1396 Royal Charter*, ed. Sarah Rees Jones, Borthwick studies in history 3 (York: Borthwick Institute of Historical Research, 1997), 145. The first reference to a male assuming a female role is to one “Ryngolds man Thomas at playtt pylatts wyff” in the Coventry Smiths Guild’s accounts in 1496. What this suggests, Goldberg argues, is not an ongoing tradition of exclusively male performance but rather a possible change in the tradition toward the end of the period as Reformation sensibilities become more prevalent and, perhaps not coincidentally, women’s roles in the craft guilds’ decline. Goldberg also suggests that women may have participated in these performances, particularly in the early, tableaux versions. See Goldberg, “Tableaux to Text,” 248, 251.

12. James Stokes, “Women and Performance: Evidences of Universal Cultural Suffrage in Medieval and Early Modern Lincolnshire,” in *Women Players in England, 1500–1650: Beyond the All-Male Stage*, ed. Pamela Allen Brown and Peter Parolin, *Studies in Performance and Early Modern Drama* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005), 25.

participation, at least in some areas of England, was greater than heretofore assumed.

The picture that is beginning to emerge is one that, at a minimum, involves women in the production and economic support of civic drama, if not in the role of actors. Gweno Williams argues that for York's Corpus Christi Play there is evidence of female participation in the financing, production, planning, and audience management for the play and that female guild members made both voluntary and involuntary financial contributions to the sustenance of the play. The drapers' guild, for example, received "paiuaunt money" from "dame Margaret dawson wydo" in 1523.¹³ Both female and male workers within a craft were subject to fines in support of the pageant as evidenced in the 1564 reference to hostillers found in violation of guild statutes: "And he or *she* that is founde culpable in the premisses or any one therof to forfait & lose vj s viiiij d thone half to the Chambre & thother half to the sustentacion of the [pagiant]." ¹⁴ Katie Normington also demonstrates female participation in production in other regions of England as well, including the making of costumes as with the Widow Ellis in Chester or the lending of garments as with the wife of Thomas Poole in Coventry. The Chester records note a payment to "griff Yeuans wife to pay for the wessing of the curtains" indicating at least a backstage participation by a woman.¹⁵ These examples demonstrate that both men and women, in York and

13. Gweno Williams, Alison Findlay, and Stephanie Hodgson-Wright, "Payments, Permits and Punishments: Women Performers and the Politics of Place," in Brown and Parolin, *Women Players in England*, 47; *REED York* 1:231.

14. *Ibid.*, 344, my italics. Note that in 1551 the hostillers no longer supported a pageant of their own but rather their pageant money went to support other pageants. The York *House Books* [York city council minute books, hereafter *HB*] f 52v (24 April 1551) note: "Alsoo it is agreed by the said presens that the Inholdars [sh] the Weavers / Drapers . Taylourz & hosiers shalbe chardged by my lord Mayour to gathir vp their Pageant money accustomed and to bryng the same and delyuer it to my said lord to be further ordred by hym towards setting forth of pageantz on Corpus christi day [as to hym sha wher most nede shall be /] wher he shall see most nede." *REED York* 1:297. Subsequent references in text.

15. Katie Normington, *Gender and Medieval Drama* (Rochester, NY: D. S. Brewer, 2004, 42 and 38.

elsewhere, were expected to contribute financially and/or materially to the support of the pageants.

The Suppression of the Corpus Christi Play

The survival of the Corpus Christi Play well into the sixteenth century argues for the importance of the play to the community. With the coming of the Reformation, religious drama became suspect because of its depiction of biblical events, and the general festival atmosphere of the play made it particularly offensive to Reformation sensibilities. Yet, in the face of growing anti-Catholic sentiment in both ecclesiastic and royal authority, the York Corpus Christi Play thrived into the reign of Elizabeth I. Harold Gardiner argues that Elizabeth was unwilling to immediately suppress the play, in part because there was too much Catholic sentiment in the North even among the minor officials. He notes: "in response to an October 1564 request for information about justices of the peace we find that of 851 justices only 431 were favorable to the government policy in matters of religion."¹⁶

While the justices of the peace had no influence over the performance of the Corpus Christi Play, their unwillingness to embrace Elizabeth's Protestant agenda illustrates general resistance to the Reformation in the North. In York, this is reflected in the city's unwillingness to abandon the Corpus Christi Play despite its association with the explicitly Catholic festival of Corpus Christi. Whether due to residual Catholic sentiment or civic and guild pride, the Corpus Christi Play survived Elizabeth's ascension in 1558 by more than a decade, finally ending in 1569.

The original occasion for the play made the play suspect. With the Reformation, the Protestant church repudiated the veneration of the Host that occasioned the feast day itself. This is reflected in the corporation records at York in 1561 which note that "for soo moche as the late fest of Corpus Christi is not nowe celebrat & kept holy day as was accustomed/ it is therefor agreed that on Corpus even my lord Mayour

16. Harold Gardiner, *Mysteries' End: An Investigation of the Last Days of the Medieval Religious Stage*, Yale Studies in English 103 (1946; repr., Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1967), 70.

& Aldermen shall in makyng the proclamacion accustomed goe about in semely sadd apparell & not in skarlet" (*HB* f. 19v [30 May 1561], *York* 1:333). This proclamation not only reflects the discontinuation of the feast day itself but also reflects Reformation values in its insistence on somber garb. Given the force of Protestant opposition to the Catholic sensibilities that were embodied by the Corpus Christi Play, it is surprising that the play survived so far into the Reformation, and its survival is a testament to the social importance of the play to the people of York.

The play was, however, eventually suppressed. Eamon Duffy argues that "given the integration of popular drama into the devotional and catechetical objectives of the late medieval Church, it was inevitable that the Elizabethan reform would attack the Corpus Christi cycles."¹⁷ This is also the main premise of Harold Gardiner's 1948 book *Mysteries' End; An Investigation of the Last Days of the Medieval Religious Stage*. Gardiner argues that the Corpus Christi Plays (in York and elsewhere) were not discontinued because of grassroots discontent with the economic burden that the plays imposed on individual craft members (as previously supposed), but rather that the plays were slowly suppressed by the central English government, particularly that of Elizabeth I, in order to reinforce Reformation ideology and lessen the opportunities for Catholic unrest.¹⁸ Similarly, Jeremy Goldberg argues that the suppression of the York play may in part be attributed to the gradual movement of the plays from guild control into the hands of the civic authorities in York in the fifteenth century. He argues that because of this shift in control, the Dean of York, Matthew Hutton, who was deeply critical of Catholic sentiment, was able to influence civic authorities, bringing the Corpus Christi Play under greater scrutiny.¹⁹ Hutton's concern regarding the religious content of the plays is clear. He wrote:

17. Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, c. 1400-c. 1580* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 579.

18. Gardiner, *Mysteries' End*, 50.

19. P. J. P. Goldberg, "Performing the Word of God," in *Life and Thought in the Northern Church, c. 1100-c. 1700: Essays in Honour of Claire Cross*, ed. Claire Cross and Diana Wood (Rochester, NY: Published for the Ecclesiastical History Society by the Boydell Press, 1999), 168-69.

Yf I were worthie to geue your lordhipp and your ritgh worshipfull brethren consell: suerlie mine advise shuld be, that it shuld not be plaid. ffor thoghe it was plausible 40 yeares agoe, & wold now also of the ignorant sort be well liked: yet now in the happie time of the gospel, I knowe the learned will mislike it and how the state will beare with it I know not" (*HB* f. 106a [24 March 1568]; *York* 1:353).

Goldberg argues that the final suppression of the plays had become more possible because the plays had moved from popular entertainment to civic festivals, and that the civic authorities "recognized the folly of resisting clerical authority at a time when the Church had become an arm of the State."²⁰

Yet, as Paul Whitfield White has demonstrated, this assumption that English Protestants were universally opposed to religious drama is not accurate. In his article "Reforming Mysteries' End: A New Look at Protestant Intervention in English Provincial Drama," he argues that the records demonstrate that at least in some communities, such as Coventry, not only was there Protestant tolerance for the religious drama but participation in it as well.²¹ Furthermore, he rightly cautions that response to religious drama is local rather than universal. In the North, where Catholic sentiment was greater, the plays perhaps retained more of their Catholic flavor and enjoyed longer popular support.

As several critics have noted, suppression of the plays themselves does not seem to have come from either the central church or state. Bing Bills cautions that Gardiner's premise that the plays were censored by the Elizabethan government is not supported by the surviving records, nor was there any sort of unified state response to the plays in any way.²² Ronald Hutton agrees, noting that "sponsorship of the traditional celebrations remained in some of the most populous and important parts of the country, and the leaders of Church and state did not themselves

20. *Ibid.*, 170.

21. Paul Whitfield White, "Reforming Mysteries' End: A New Look at Protestant Intervention in English Provincial Drama," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 29, no.1 (1999): 121-47, 125.

22. Bing Bills, "'The Suppression Theory' and the English Corpus Christi Play: A Re-Examination," *Theatre Journal* 32, no. 2 (1980): 157-68, 160, doi: 10.2307/3207109.

subscribe to the campaign against them.”²³ Alexandra Johnston and Katie Normington have both argued that the suppression of the Corpus Christi plays comes from a confluence of factors beyond the change in religious ideology. Normington explains that the “shift of theatre from outdoor to legitimate indoor theatre, the development of the professional writer and the rise of aristocratic patronage all contributed to the decline of the cycles.”²⁴ The question of how and why the York Corpus Christi Play was suppressed is far from settled. The reasons for the ending of public religious drama clearly differed from town to town, and it is becoming more evident that the reasons are multiple and subtle.

In York, this complexity is evident in that the pageants did not end all at once. The drapers’ pageant “The Death of the Virgin,” the weavers’ “The Assumption of the Virgin,” and the hostillers’ “The Coronation of the Virgin” were the first to be suppressed, in 1548, about two decades before the final production of the York Corpus Christi Play as a whole in 1569. The overtly Catholic material of these pageants surely made them more than susceptible to Reformation censure. Yet as Gardiner points out, resistance to this reform was much stronger in the north of England, and York’s unwillingness to suspend performance of the Corpus Christi Play reflects this.²⁵ The York *House Books* note the cessation of the three pageants in 1548 without comment as to the reason: “Also it is forther agreyd by the sayd presens that Corpuscristry play shalbe playd this yere Certen pagauntes excpte/ That is to say/ the deyng of our Lady/ assumpcion of our Lady/ and Coronacion of our Lady” (*HB*, f. 16v [25 May 1548], *York* 1:291-92). The repeated “our Lady” of the *House Book* entry reflects a continued Catholic sentiment towards the Virgin Mary, despite the discontinuation of the pageants, but there is no explanation given for the pageants’ suspension. A similar notation appeared the following year, and in 1551 the House Books note on April

23. Ronald Hutton. *The Rise and Fall of Merry England: The Ritual Year, 1400-1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 152.

24. Normington, *Gender and Medieval Drama*, 16; Alexandra F. Johnston, “‘All the World Was a Stage’: Records of Early English Drama,” in *The Theatre of Medieval Europe: New Research in Early Drama*, ed. Simon Eckehard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 128.

25. Gardiner, *Mysteries’ End*, 70.

24 that the pageant money of the innholders (hostillers), weavers, and drapers should be delivered to the Lord Mayor to be used in the setting forth of the Corpus Christi Play “wher he shall see most nede” (*HB* f. 52v [24 April 1551], *York* 1:297). The guilds involved were still liable for supporting the Corpus Christi Play as a whole but were no longer given their own pageants. This means that while these guilds were still required to participate in the play’s production financially, they no longer were afforded visual representation as part of the guild structure of the city through the performance of the play.²⁶

Despite the reverential referencing of Mary as “our Lady” in the *House Book* entry of 1548, these pageants may have been more vulnerable to suppression because they most embraced Catholic sacramental teaching in their depiction of the Virgin Mary. In Wakefield, the northern ecclesiastical commission complained that the pageants contained things “which tende to the derogation of the Majestie and glorie of God, the prophanation of the sacramentes and the mauntyaunce of superstition and idolatrie” and demanded that “no pageant be used or set furthe . . . whiche tende to the maintenaunce of superstition and idolatrie or which be contrarie to the lawes of God and of the realme.”²⁷

The Protestant charge of idolatry was closely associated with the cult of the Virgin and veneration of the saints. Duffy notes that Protestant attacks on the cults of the saints began even in Henry VIII’s reign and were firmly entrenched by the time of Edward VI. He argues that royal visitations were often used as the primary agency of reform, saying “what documentary evidence survives of the visitors’ activities shows that they were using freely the powers granted to them to go beyond the letter of the Injunctions. One of their primary targets was the devotional world of the late medieval laity, especially those parts of it associated with the Virgin.”²⁸

26. The weavers, the most affluent of the three guilds, did briefly assume the Woolpackers’ Supper at Emmeus in 1553. See *HB* f. H (14 April 1553), *York* 1:307.

27. Gardiner, *Mysteries’ End*, 72, 78–79; my italics.

28. Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, 460.

The Cult of the Virgin and Reformation England

The vehemence with which the reformers in England attacked the cult of the Virgin Mary was not surprising given how popular and firmly established Marian devotion was in England in the late medieval period. Gail McMurry Gibson notes that the “Marian fervor that we associate today with Italy or Spain—or link with the Gothic Cathedrals of Our Lady that glorified the plains and the Capetian politics of medieval France—was in the Middle Ages of English renown.”²⁹ England’s devotion to the Virgin began in the Anglo-Saxon period and had so saturated English theological practice by the thirteenth century that England was known in Europe as “Mary’s Dower.” The cult of the Virgin has its roots in the fifth century when the Council of Ephesus declared Mary Theotokos or “God Bearer.” This presentation of the Virgin as God Bearer was immediately controversial; in the same century, the monk Nestorius argued that Mary gave birth only to the human part of Christ, not the divine, and therefore should be called Christokos, Mother of Christ rather than Theotokos.³⁰ The power of Mary was thus not her own divine power but rather her power to intercede with Christ on the behalf of others; as Helen Hackett has put it, she was “a human mother ever connected to God, and a female figure willing to offer her aid.”³¹

It was this feminine intercessory power that Barry Spurr argues is at the heart of medieval devotion to Mary. He suggests that Mary offered a “feminine manifestation of the divine” in a male-dominated society and Church, and Ruben Espinosa argues that Marian devotion demonstrates “a distinct gravitation toward the Virgin Mary’s feminine potential.”³² While the Catholic Church officially defined veneration of Mary as hyperdulia, special worship due to the mother of God, rather

29. Gail McMurray Gibson, *The Theater of Devotion: East Anglian Drama and Society in the Late Middle Ages* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 138.

30. Ruben Espinosa, *Masculinity and Marian Efficacy in Shakespeare’s England* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011), 5.

31. Helen Hackett, *Virgin Mother, Maiden Queen: Elizabeth I and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (New York, NY: St. Martin’s, 1995), 23.

32. Barry Spurr, *See the Virgin Blest: The Virgin Mary in English Poetry* (New York, NY: Pgrave Macmillan, 1999), 28; Espinosa, *Masculinity and Marian Efficacy*, 14.

than latria, worship of God, in actual practice, there was little distinction.³³ It is Mary's intercessory, and possibly divine, power that became the focus of Protestant reform. While all Protestant reformers objected to veneration of Mary to some degree, their vehemence in England was particularly marked. On the continent, reformers like Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Huldrych Zwingli represented the Virgin Mary as worthy of respect.³⁴ In England, this was not the case.

The exaggerated reaction against the cult of the Virgin in England may have been in direct response to the power the idea of Mary as intercessor had throughout the late medieval period in England. For the Protestants, all idolatry was misguided, but the veneration of Mary was seen as particularly dangerous, perhaps evil. Reformer Bishop Hugh Latimer, in a 1552 sermon, said of the veneration of Mary:

Here is confounded and overthrown the foolish opinion of the papists, which would have us to worship a creature before the Creator; Mary before her son. These wise men do not so; they worship not Mary; and wherefore? Because God only is to be worshipped: But Mary is not God.³⁵

It was also Latimer who, in 1537, stripped the image of the Worcester Virgin to show that it was "the dolled-up effigy of some early medieval bishop" and burned it the following year. The stripping of the image of the Virgin a year before the burning was designed to shock the populace, according to Margaret Aston: "annihilating supposedly immaculate purity by inversion."³⁶ Much of the rhetoric of these reformers emphasizes a repudiation of the divinity of Mary. The reformers present the miracles of Mary as, at best, fiction, and at worst thinly veiled paganism.³⁷ Homily 14 of the Church of England's Homilies (1547) asks what

33. Hackett, *Virgin Mother, Maiden Queen*, 25.

34. Espinosa, *Masculinity and Marian Efficacy*, 20.

35. Hugh Latimer, *Sermons*, ed. George Elwes Corrie, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Parker Society, 1855), 2: 153.

36. Margaret Aston, *England's Iconoclasts: Laws Against Images* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1988), 173, and Margaret Aston, *Faith and Fire: Popular and Unpopular Religion, 1350-1600* (London: Continuum, 1993), 295.

37. For more on the cult of the Virgin in late medieval and early modern England,

are such idols of the Virgin “but an imitation of the Gentiles idolaters, Diana Agrotera, Diana Coriphea, Diana Ephesia, &c. Venus Cypria, Venus Paphia, Venus Gnidia?”³⁸

Veneration of the Virgin may also reflect early modern England’s cultural identity crisis as the masculinist society dealt with, as Espinosa says, “a rise in anxiety about an effeminized national identity under a female monarch.” While the theological complaint against the Virgin Mary was the way in which she deflected praise away from God and towards herself, she also represented a powerful female religious symbol in a country struggling to accept a powerful female political leader. Espinosa argues that in Early Modern England, Protestant hostility towards Catholic iconography is expressed in gendered terms—what is Catholic becomes associated with women.³⁹ Huston Diehl also notes that the Reformation response to idolatry is gendered. Diehl claims that the Protestant reformers, by “invoking a symbolic order that aligns the masculine with the spirit, the feminine with the body, . . . identify all the images with women and therefore denounce them because they are of the flesh and not the spirit.”⁴⁰ Similarly, both Carlos Eire and Frances Dolan argue that in post-Reformation England, Catholicism is linked with the feminine, particularly with disorderly women.⁴¹

see Espinosa, *Masculinity and Marian Efficacy*; Gary Waller, *The Virgin Mary in Late Medieval and Early Modern English Literature and Popular Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Aston, *Faith and Fire*; Hackett, *Virgin Mother, Maiden Queen*.

38. *Certain Sermons or Homilies Appointed to be Read in Churches in the Time of the Late Queen Elizabeth* (Oxford, 1840), 207.

39. Espinosa, *Masculinity and Marian Efficacy*, 24, 26.

40. Huston Diehl, *Staging Reform, Reforming the Stage: Protestantism and Popular Theater in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 160–61.

41. See Carlos M. N. Eire, *The War Against the Idols* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 315; Frances E. Dolan, *Whores of Babylon: Catholicism, Gender, and Seventeenth Century Print Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 85.

The Cult of Mary and the Suppression of the Marian Pageants

Because of this growing suspicion of Marian devotion, it is not surprising that the pageants about Mary were the first to face government censorship. In York, the Marian pageants were first suppressed in the year following Edward IV's ascension to the throne in 1547. The pageants make a brief reappearance during Mary's reign, 1554-58, before finally disappearing for good in 1561 after the ascension of Elizabeth.⁴² The timing of the suppression of these guilds' pageants supports the notion that the primary reason for ending them was religious. Their disappearance during the reigns of the Protestant rulers Edward and Elizabeth and subsequent resumption during the reign of the Catholic Mary argues for a Protestant objection to the "idolatrous" subject matter of the pageants, which prompted their excision.⁴³

There are several possible reasons why these guilds, the drapers, the weavers, and the hostillers, might have been given the Marian pageants. The weavers' and the drapers' guilds were associated with the cult of Mary. The weavers were associated with the religious guild of St. Mary, and there is a similar "traditional devotional association of merchants, mercers, and drapers with the Virgin Mary."⁴⁴ Beyond these affiliations, the textile crafts were sound choices for the pageants because they could

42. An entry in the *HB*, f. 31 (9 February 1554) states: "Item that Corpus christi playe . . . shall (god willyng) be played this yere . . . And that theis pagiantes that of late were left forth shall be played ageyne as before tyme they were at the Chardges of theym that were wont to bring theym fforth." *REED York* 1:310. In 1561 the three pageants were suspended again: "Corpus christi play shalbe played this yere *with* good players as hath ben accustomed Except onely the pagiantes of the dyenge Assumption and Coronacion of *our* Lady" *HB* f. 10. (27 March 1561). *REED York* 1:331-32.

43. The brief reinstatement of the Marian pageants with the ascension of Mary to the throne suggests that the city officials were sensitive to the theological implications of the pageants. My argument is that this concern about the specifically Catholic content of the pageants was not the only factor contributing to their suppression.

44. The hostillers assume the pageant from the mayor in 1468 and produce it until its suppression in 1547. When the pageant is discontinued, it is the hostillers who would have been associated with the pageant. See York City Chamberlain Rolls, Y C3:4, *REED York* 1:101; Goldberg, "Craft Guilds, The Corpus Christi Play and Civic Government," 144, 147-48.

be associated with the blue cloth of the Virgin, allowing the crafts to demonstrate their art. The weavers' pageant's single prop is a piece of woven cloth that serves as evidence of the Virgin's appearance. It was appropriate that it was the innkeepers who welcomed Mary to Heaven in the "Coronation of the Virgin" just as they welcome strangers into their homes and inns. Finally, Goldberg argues that many of the pageants with substantial female roles were taken by crafts that traditionally employed a disproportionate number of women, including the crafts of "weaving, tailoring, capmaking, the small metal trades, and the crafts of the marshal and the Hostiller."⁴⁵

There are certainly aspects of the three pageants about Mary that might concern Protestants. Mary's role as intercessor is evident in the "Death of the Virgin." When two Jews ask Mary to beseech Christ for forgiveness on their behalf and thus bring them to salvation, she does:

Jesu my sone, for my sake beseke I þe þis,
 As þou arte gracious and grete Gode þou graunte me þy grace.
 Ðei þat is comen of my kynde and amende will þere mys,
 Nowe specially þou þame spede and spare þam a space,
 And be þer belde, if þi willis be.⁴⁶

This passage not only illustrates Mary's role as intercessor as she pleads for forgiveness of those of her kin who will "amend their misdeeds" but also emphasizes her role as Christ's mother, and Christ forgives them to make her mind easy: "Marie my modir, thurgh þe might now of me / for to make þe in mynde with mirthe to be mending, / Þyne asking all haly here heete I nowe þe" (151-53). Mary also asks that Jesus spare sailors who call upon Mary in time of need, that he give succor to those in need who call on her by name, and that he watch over women giving birth and bring them to Heaven if they die (130-40, 144-50). Mary's power is similar in "The Assumption of the Virgin," when Mary explains to Thomas:

45. While Goldberg does not reference the Marian pageants by name here, the Marian pageants are those with the most substantial female roles within the York Corpus Christi Play.

46. Richard Beadle, 44 The Drapers: "The Death of the Virgin." *York Plays* 44, lines 127-31. Subsequent references in text by pageant and line numbers.

And in siztte of my sone þer is sittand
 Shall I knele to þat comely with croune,
 Þat who in dispaire be dale or be doune
 With pitevous playnte in perellis will praye me,
 If he swynke or swet in swelte or in swoune,
 I schall sewe to my souerayne sone for to say me
 He schall graunte þame þer grace
 Be it mann in his mourning
 Or womanne in childinge.
 (185-93)

In this pageant, Mary is no longer asking Jesus to grant her request to aid those in need, but rather she is explaining to Thomas that that is her role. The phrase “will praye me” in line 188 is somewhat ambiguous in that it might mean either “request of me” or “pray to me,” but in either case, it is to Mary that the supplicant appeals, not to Christ directly. The last of the Mary pageants, “The Coronation of the Virgin” focuses on Mary’s role as Heaven’s queen, but here too Jesus grants “þame grace with all my might / Thurgh asking of þi praier” (149-50).

Mary’s function as intercessor, however, is not the only material that might have been viewed as dangerous in sixteenth-century England. As Espinosa and others have argued, Mary’s role as a powerful female figure may have engendered anxiety. The three pageants in question all present Mary as an influential woman. This is most evident in “The Coronation of the Virgin,” which focuses on Mary as the Queen of Heaven. Jesus explains this in the first stanza, saying: “Off heuene I haue hir chosen queen” (7). The angels hail her and tell her that “Alle heune and earþe schall worschippe þe” (77), and Jesus assures her that “All aungellis bright þei schall þe bowe / And worschippe þe worþely iwis” (107-8). In “The Death of the Virgin,” she is also called by Jesus to the “highest of heuene” to sit “next þe high trinité” (177, 181).

Though Mary is called “meke and mild” at times in the pageants, she also clearly commands obedience. In “The Death of the Virgin,” she addresses John with the authority of a mother, chiding him not to mourn her passing (53-55), and he responds to her later as an obedient son, ready to do her bidding:

And perfore at pi bidding ful bayne will I be.
 Iff per oght, modir, pat I amende may,
 I pray pe, mildest of mode, meue pe to me,
 And I schall, dereworpi dame, do it ilke a daye.
 (111-14)

She commands her grieving women to cease crying. Perhaps most significantly, John explains to the apostles that they were brought to her deathbed because she asked it of Jesus and “pus has he wrought atte hir will” (84). Throughout the pageant, Mary controls the actions of others, even the Apostles. In “The Assumption of the Virgin,” she likewise takes a commanding role.

The primary action of the pageant comes from Thomas’s witnessing of Mary’s assumption into Heaven. Throughout their interaction, Thomas looks to Mary for guidance, and Mary issues directions to Thomas, telling him to “do way all pi doutes” (124), to “Go to pi brethir in bale are abiding” (144), to “sesse of thy sorrowe” (159), and to do her bidding “to do panne thy deuvere be dressand” (183). In their interaction, Mary has nine speeches. Of these, five begin with commands, and the other four are explanatory. The Mary of these pageants is not merely a virginal vessel and a model of obedience; she is the Queen of Heaven and a commander of men. In a time of increasing anxieties about women and their role in society, this vision of the Virgin Mary might appear to be more than usually threatening.

There are other factors as well that make these pageants particularly susceptible to suppression. Each of the guilds producing these pageants faced social, political, and economic challenges that lessened their ability to defend them. These guilds, the drapers, the weavers, and the hostillers, all evidenced a high percentage of female participation at a time when there were increasing restrictions on women both socially and economically. At the same time, these guilds faced economic decline due in part to the downturn of the wool trade in York. These social and economic factors meant that these guilds were not in a position to successfully oppose the suspension of their pageants.

Women and Work in Late Medieval York

Records suggest that all three of these guilds had a higher percentage of women working in the craft than most other guilds particularly from the middle of the fourteenth through the early fifteenth centuries. While women were allowed to become guild members, the majority of the women working in these crafts would not have had formal guild standing. Goldberg argues that though women did not often have a formal role in the guilds, they did participate in the crafts, often in support of their husbands and fathers.⁴⁷ Assessing to what degree women participated in the work of these crafts, however, is difficult because of their lack of representation in official documents. Heather Swanson notes that the “recorded ordinances of late medieval craft guilds describe the organization of craftsmen; the women who made up half the workforce were barely considered.”⁴⁸ Nonetheless, the fourteenth century seems to have been a period of unusual economic prosperity for women. Following the Black Death, women in York saw increased economic opportunities because they were needed in the workforce. Goldberg explains that “the advent of plague . . . in 1348-9 marked a profound downturn in demographic levels, but an expansion in the economy.”⁴⁹ J. N. Bartlett argues that this economic growth was augmented by an expansion of the city’s cloth trade in the second half of the fourteenth century. In the first three decades of the fourteenth century, only twelve weavers were granted freeman status according to the Freeman Rolls of York. This increased to twenty in the fourth decade, and in the second half of the century, 271 weavers were granted freeman status. The number of women in the workforce began to decline again in the fifteenth century and, by the beginning of the sixteenth century, had reached levels similar to

47. See Goldberg, *Women, Work*, chap. 3 for a thorough discussion of the role of women in York’s craft guilds, and Goldberg, “Tableaux to Text,” 262. Goldberg notes in particular a 1390 provision of the York founders guild granting one of its members an additional apprentice because he lacks a wife.

48. Heather Swanson, “The Illusion of Economic Structure: Craft Guilds in Late Medieval English Towns,” *Past & Present* 121 (Nov., 1988): 29-48, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/650910>.

49. Goldberg, *Women, Work*, 336.

those at the beginning of the fourteenth century.⁵⁰ This expansion of the economy more generally and of the cloth trade in particular meant more women were needed within the wool crafts both as workers and as masters. While the increase in the total admissions to the Freeman register in the 1360s could be attributed to plague losses, the increase in the textile trades was higher than average, signifying the presence of a healthy domestic market.⁵¹ As will be shown below, this meant that there were more opportunities for women because of the decrease in the male labor force as well as an expanding market for textiles both at home and abroad.

The precise role that women played in this economic expansion is hard to quantify because, as Swanson asserts, while women were members of craft fraternities, “they had no public role in the craft guilds.”⁵² Goldberg also notes that because so few medieval records other than the registered ordinances survive, it is difficult to say much with certainty about female guild membership. The most visible members were those admitted to freeman status. To be a freeman of the city meant that one could trade within the city, and this status was usually granted by right of patrimony, by traditional apprenticeship, or by purchase. Widows were sometimes granted freeman status, and daughters sometimes received it through patrimony. However, only 1% of those admitted to freeman status in York were women, and the freeman rolls record only a portion of the active craft masters.⁵³ Because freeman status was required to trade in the city, and many weavers, for example, created product only for export, York was home to craftsmen who would not have sought freeman status. Goldberg argues that because women’s wages were traditionally lower than their male counterparts, female labor was in particular demand in the post-plague economic expansion. This demand for female labor may in part be seen in the number of women admitted as freemen

50. J. N. Bartlett, “The Expansion and Decline of York in the Later Middle Ages,” *Economic History Review*, n.s., 12, no. 1 (1959): 17–33, 22, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2591078>. See also Heather Swanson, *Medieval Artisans: An Urban Class in Late Medieval England* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 28–29.

51. Goldberg, *Women, Work*, 73.

52. Swanson, *Medieval Artisans*, 107.

53. Goldberg, *Women, Work*, 30, 107.

to the city. In the century and a half after the Black Death, 45% of all female admissions to the franchise come in the thirty years after the year 1414. Swanson demonstrates that in the weavers apprenticeship records there are thirty masters out of a total of 115 who are not also listed in the freeman rolls.⁵⁴ Women working in these trades would also not be recorded while working with their husbands or fathers. Aulnage records perhaps better reflect the degree of female participation. The records from 1394-95 list a total of 460 names of clothmakers; of these, 180 were women, almost 40% of the clothmakers whose work was inspected in that year (39.13%).⁵⁵ Nor do the records include the carders, spinners or sempsters (seamstress) who provided support and piece work for the textile crafts (other than in some of the wills as outlined below). So the percentage of women working in the cloth trades was probably much greater than the records suggest. What records do indicate is that there is a relative increase in women working in the textile crafts in the late fourteenth century.

According to Goldberg, poll tax records indicate a “wider range of female economic activity by 1378-81 than appears . . . to have been true of the pre-plague era,” noting that the majority of these are within the victualling, textile, and leatherworking trades.⁵⁶ Goldberg’s examination of the gender composition of households according to occupation also demonstrates the feminization of the victualling and textile trades. While the occupational data from urban poll tax sources are usually limited to household heads, Goldberg argues that “an analysis of service sex ratios derived from the same material does . . . demonstrate occupational-specific patterns that lend support to the view that the economic activities of the servant group were determined by the occupation of the head of the household.”⁵⁷ Goldberg’s analysis of the records from 1379 and 1381 suggest that the households of brewers, hostillers, and drapers had the highest ratio of women to men in the occupations

54. P. J. P. Goldberg, “Female Labour, Service and Marriage in the Late Medieval Urban North,” *Northern History* 22 (1986): 35; Swanson, *Medieval Artisans*, 33-34.

55. Aulnage was a system for measuring and inspecting cloth production. The records were used for taxation as well. Swanson, *Medieval Artisans*, 35.

56. Goldberg, *Women, Work*, 101.

57. *Ibid.*, 87.

listed. In addition, he estimates that 71% of the female householders engaged in various occupations were engaged in victualling, textile, and clothing trades according to the data set that includes York (this data also included the towns of Lynn, Pontrefract, Howden, Ripon, Doncaster, Sheffield, Rotherham, Tickhill, Wakefield, Canterbury, and Shrewsbury). Independent women traders were also most likely to be found in the victualing, textiles, and clothing occupations.⁵⁸

The feminization of the textile crafts makes a certain amount of sense because women had worked as clothmakers for centuries. Yorkshire seems to have had a more feminized textile industry than the rest of England, and in Tickhill, in particular, the weaving industry appears to have been completely feminized. In Coventry as well, the weavers' Ordinances suggest that the wives and daughters of masters regularly assisted. In York, we have more evidence of female involvement in weaving. While many of these women in the textile industries worked as spinners or carders for very little money, there is good evidence for them working as weavers as well—a more lucrative trade. Widows of weavers, in particular, seem to have been given the opportunity to work as independent craftsmen upon their husbands' death. Goldberg explains, "there is ample guild evidence to show that wives and daughters of weavers helped operate the loom and it is likely that many of the women weavers working independently were in fact widows of weavers."⁵⁹ Fourteenth century weavers John Walton and John Newhouse left their looms to their widows, and Isabella, wife of John Newhouse, was admitted to the city franchise after her husband's death. Henry Browne and John Kendale made provisions for their apprentices to serve their widows, and the York weavers' Ordinances of 1400 permitted women to work in the trade if they could demonstrate their skill.⁶⁰ Furthermore, the report

58. Goldberg, *Women, Work*, 92 and table 3.1. Note that of these three crafts, only the hostillers and the drapers had Corpus Christi Play pageants. Goldberg argues that single female traders were found most often in trades that experienced a shortage of male servant labor. *Ibid.*, 95–98.

59. *Ibid.*, 97–99, 120.

60. See also the *York Memorandum Book Lettered A/Y in the Guild-Hall Muniment Room*, ed. Maud Sellers, vol. 1, 1376–1419 (Durham, 1912), 243. "Item, volumus et ordinamus quod decetero nulla mulier, cuiuscumque status seu

in 1399 into infringement of the York weavers' Charter of Henry II lists fifteen female master weavers, indicating that these professions were more feminized than usual.⁶¹

The drapers, specialized cloth merchants, also depended on women as an integral part of their workforce as a source of cheap labor, though the evidence for female participation in the trade is not as strong as for the weavers. Women's work is reflected to some extent in the wills of the period. Swanson cites the example of "William Shipley, a draper who died in 1435, bequeathed 6d 'to each poor woman who works and spins for me.'" ⁶² The poll tax from 1381 also lists a woman as a draper and head of household. ⁶³ In addition, Goldberg's analysis of the gender composition of craft households argues that the drapers' craft was feminized in that it had a higher number of female servants working within the households of guild members. He argues that these servants would have worked in support of the craft and not merely as domestic workers. In York, only the brewers had a higher percentage of women in the household than did the drapers. Of the thirty-one draper households reflected in the poll tax record of 1379 and 1381, 54% of them employed servants, and 36.4% of the total household population was in service. Because the gender ratio for these households was 72.5 (meaning 72 men per 100 women), it is likely that the majority of these servants were female and probably worked in the craft in some capacity. Of the twenty-five crafts included in Goldberg's analysis, only seven reflect households with a greater ratio of women to men. ⁶⁴ These same poll tax records

condicionis fuerit, ammodo sit posita inter nos ad texandum, causa peyoracionis pannorum venalium et prejudicii artificii nostri ac deterioracionis firme regie predictae, nisi fuerit bene erudita et sufficienter approbata ad operandum in artificio nostro predicto."

61. Goldberg, *Women, Work*, 120-21.

62. Swanson, *Medieval Artisans*, 49, 31.

63. Goldberg, *Women, Work*, 94. See also Goldberg, "Craft Guilds," 163 and n. 19, which notes that the 1381 poll tax records serve only as "a very crude indication of those crafts in which women played a conspicuous role."

64. In his article "Some Reflections on Women, Work, and the Family in the Later Medieval English Town," Goldberg argues "We may note also that female servants could represent an important source of additional labour, but that such service also represented a valuable source of training for future wives and businesswomen." In

show that one of those thirty-one draper households had a women as head of household. As with the weavers, it appears that there were more women involved in the draper's craft than the records demonstrate. For the drapers, whose product in York was primarily for export, there was less need to attain freeman status, and therefore the drapers as a whole are less well represented in the Freeman Rolls.

The hostillers, or innkeepers, also had a higher percentage of women than many other trades. Goldberg notes that among the victuallers "those trades that were most frequently practiced independently by women, [were] . . . those of the huckster, the brewer, and the hosteller."⁶⁵ As noted above, the victuallers as a class had a high complement of women as compared to other types of crafts, so the higher incidence of independent female workers even among the victuallers indicates that the hostillers' was a feminized trade. Goldberg's analysis of the gender composition of households in York also supports this. Of the twenty hostiller households reflected in the poll tax records of 1379 and 1381, 45% of them employed servants and 25.5% of the total household population was in service. The gender ratio for these households was 82.1, which demonstrates that these households, like those of the drapers, had a higher than usual female composition. Establishing with precision the number of female hostillers is particularly difficult since, as Swanson explains, hostillers are underrepresented in medieval records due to the trade's unsavory reputation. It is not until the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries that the trade was more generally declared as an occupation in the records. However, one fourteenth-century example provides some insight into the gender composition of the trade. In 1304, forty-five hostillers were prosecuted for various offences, yet no hostillers appear in the freeman rolls until after 1396. The feminization of the trade may be seen in the proportion of these fined hostillers who were women. Of the forty-five hostillers, eleven were women (24.4%). Swanson suggests that this feminization may have been because innkeeping was often an

Ser mujer en la ciudad medieval europea, ed. Jesús Ángel Solórzano Telechea, Beatriz Arizaga Bolumburu, and Amélia Aguiar Andrade [Proceedings of the International Meeting of the Middle Ages 2012, Nájera], *Ciencias históricas*; 25 (Logroño: Instituto de Estudios Riojanos, 2013), 192; Goldberg, *Women, Work*, 92.

65. Goldberg, *Women, Work*, 98.

occupation that was adjunct to another, a man's, occupation and was run by wives or servants. Alice Maners, for example, ran a hostel in the home of William Fader, and three of the thirteen hostillers noted in the 1381 poll tax records were also mercers. Swanson argues that the hostels were most likely run by their wives or servants.⁶⁶ The fourteenth century thus seems to evidence a burgeoning of economic opportunities for women, though these economic gains do not appear to have translated into increased political power.

The Working Woman's Decline

Although women's economic activity and guild participation increased in the fourteenth century, this does not necessarily mean that women gained political power or increased social status. As Judith Bennett has argued, a change in women's experiences might not translate into a change in their status within the society.⁶⁷ Such was the case in York, and the gains of the fourteenth century proved ephemeral. By the middle of the fifteenth century, the economic fortunes of York began to worsen and with them the participation of women in the craft guilds. The cloth guilds were particularly hard hit for a number of reasons. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, much of York's trade was cloth exported to the Low Countries. But in the fifteenth century that trade began to disappear, with most of the cloth trade instead going out of the south of England to France and Italy. In the 1470s, York's textile industry began to collapse, and Swanson argues that this was because of the increasing importance of London as a center for textile export. This decrease in production, as reflected primarily in the aulnage figures, was accompanied by a decline in the textile workforce with fewer apprentices being accepted into the guilds beginning in the 1460s.⁶⁸ This loss of export trade was a huge economic blow to the cloth guilds, and the drapers were particularly hard hit because their trade was primarily cloth for export.

66. Swanson, *Medieval Artisans*.

67. Judith M. Bennett, "Confronting Continuity," *Journal of Women's History* 9, no. 3 (1997): 73-94, 82, doi: 10.1353/jowh.2010.0485.

68. Swanson, *Medieval Artisans*, 29-30.

Thus it was the drapers “rather than the tailors [who sold to the local market] who suffered from the failure of the York weaving industry.”⁶⁹

The decline of the weaving industry in York was reflected in the geography of the city as well. Goldberg demonstrates that in the late fourteenth century there appears to have been a distinct commercial district in York in the northeast quadrant of the city in the parishes of St. Crux, All Saints, and The Pavement. Although this quarter seems to have been dominated by the mercers, it was populated by a number of weavers as well. Yet by the late fifteenth century, the latter had all but disappeared. Instead, the weavers and the fullers were by then concentrated in more impoverished parishes outside the city center. These more impoverished parishes also were home to an increased number of women, particularly the parishes of All Saints North Street (across the Ouse in the southwest quadrant of the city), St. John del Pyke (in the far northwest quadrant of the city), and St. Savors (in the northeast quadrant).⁷⁰

The weakening of the wool trade in general was exacerbated by the continuing decline of the population around York. It is ironic that this population decline was in part a result of women’s success in the guilds. Because women were more able to support themselves through work, they no longer had to marry for economic reasons; they tended to marry later and for companionate reasons, or they didn’t marry at all.⁷¹ In the immediate post-plague years, the average age of marriage had risen, perhaps reflecting women’s ability to support themselves outside of marriage. This ability resulted in a further population decline leading to diminished local demand for cloth. When female self-sufficiency declined in the late fifteenth century, due to the stagnating economy and the prevailing attitudes against women in trade, the marriage age declined again. Goldberg notes that the decreased relevance of women in the trades was reflected in how they were named in the records of the

69. Goldberg, *Women, Work*, 71; Swanson, *Medieval Artisans*, 49.

70. Goldberg, *Women, Work*, 317-18. These “marginal and less economically developed” parishes had more female-headed households by the end of the fourteenth century.

71. For a discussion of this, see Goldberg, “Marriage in Town and Country,” *Women, Work*, 203-80.

late fifteenth century. Whereas at the beginning of the period, women were sometimes identified in the records not by their marital status but rather by their occupations, by the end of the century they were primarily identified by marital status. He concludes, a “woman’s fulfillment came thus to be seen in terms of marriage and family.”⁷²

Unlike the weavers and the drapers, the hostillers saw an increase in economic success by the late fifteenth century. However, theirs was a trade that had little political power. Until the latter part of the century, innkeepers were excluded by law from holding public office. By the end of the period though still legally barred, in practice they held office if they agreed to refrain from trading in victuals while in office.⁷³ Yet like other trades with a relatively high percentage of women, they suffered from increasing restrictions on women in the fifteenth century.

By the end of the fifteenth century and into the sixteenth century, prevailing attitudes towards women both socially and professionally had become more restrictive, and women began to be excluded from craft guild membership. In Bristol, for example the weavers complained that “likely men to do the king service in his wars” were threatened by competition from women. In Coventry, Bristol, Hull, and Norwich, women were specifically forbidden to work as weavers. Women who remained in the workforce were likely to be forced into the more poorly paid trades as communities moved to protect male employment.⁷⁴ Goldberg explains that this “process [was] most marked and first observed within the woollen textiles sector through the loss of export markets, and it is here that specific gild regulation against the employment of women is observed.”⁷⁵ In York, there appear to have been no similar ordinances

72. Ibid., 175, 278.

73. Swanson, *Medieval Artisans*, 25.

74. Jaqueline Eales, *Women in Early Modern England, 1500-1700* (London: UCL Press, 1988), 74. Eales also argues that the population gains of the fifteenth century led to a decline in women’s participation in the trades. See also Swanson, “The Illusion of Economic Structure,” 40; Martha C. Howell, *Women, Production, and Patriarchy in Late Medieval Cities* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 178-79; Eileen Power, *Medieval Women*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 60.

75. P. J. P. Goldberg, *Women, Work*, p.337.

against female workers within the textile trades. However, the changing demographics of the workforce are illustrated to some degree by the changing gender ratio of the servants within craft households. Whereas during the fourteenth century, when demand for labor was higher, women made up a large portion of certain artisanal households, by the end of the fifteenth century, the number of women working as servants in artisanal households, where they would have obtained at least informal training in the craft, had declined, while the number of women working as servants in mercantile households had increased. In his analysis of this data, Goldberg concludes that “service sex ratios as generated from testamentary sources do suggest that by the late fifteenth century, and by the mid-fifteenth century in the case of the more vulnerable weavers’ craft, female servants were being excluded from all skilled artisan craft activity.”⁷⁶ The York dyers’ ordinances of the late fourteenth century also demonstrate increasing restrictions on women in the workforce in that they allowed widows to practice the trade for only one year following their husband’s death. They could continue longer only if their servant was granted freeman status.⁷⁷

Katrina Honeyman and Jordan Goodman also argue that the fifteenth century was a period of intense gender conflict throughout Europe that manifested itself in the workplace. They explain that “the transformation of women’s work began in towns where women became excluded from crafts and skilled work and were relegated to low paid and low productivity employment.”⁷⁸

The change in attitudes towards female workers began to be seen in moral terms as well. Goldberg argues that women began to be represented as “active agents of the devil whose actions provoked divine displeasure in the form of economic malaise.”⁷⁹ In 1492, Coventry,

76. Ibid., 198–200, 200.

77. Ibid., 121–22. See *York Memorandum Book* 1:114.

78. See Katrina Honeyman and Jordan Goodman, “Women’s Work, Gender Conflict, and Labour Markets in Europe, 1500–1900,” *The Economic History Review*, n.s., 44, no. 4 (Nov., 1991), 608–28, 610, doi: 10.2307/2597804.

79. P. J. P. Goldberg, “Women,” in *Fifteenth-Century Attitudes: Perceptions of Society in Late Medieval England*, ed. Rosemary Horrox (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 120.

for example, issued a series of ordinances that Goldberg asserts were designed to remedy its economic troubles through improving public morality. Among these ordinances were several aimed at single women:

Coventry folk were forbidden to let rooms to “eny Tapster, or Woman of evell name,” nor were such women to receive any servants or apprentices. Most draconian of all it was ordained that “no senglewoman, being in good hele & myghty in body to labour within the age of 1 [fifty] yeres, take nor kepe frohensfurth housez nor chambers to them-self . . . but that they go to service till they be married.”⁸⁰

Merry Wiesner also notes that as the economic opportunities for single women declined in late northwestern-European medieval cities, so did their reputation as virtuous women. In the sixteenth century, cities facing increasing populations of unmarried and underemployed women began to see these women as not only an economic but also a moral problem. The women were “‘masterless,’ that is, not members of male-headed households, at a time when greater stress was being laid on the authority of the husband and father, and so were perceived as a possible threat to the social order.”⁸¹ Because marriage had become viewed in the sixteenth century as the “natural” vocation of women, unmarried women were viewed with suspicion as “unnatural.” Wiesner claims that while suspicion of unmarried women was not new to the sixteenth century, this period saw the first laws enacted forbidding unmarried women to move into cities. She notes that in some cases “unmarried daughters were ordered to leave the household of their widowed mothers to find a position in a male-headed household if their mothers could not prove need for them at home.”⁸² Not only were women losing the economic gains that they had made in the previous century, but they were also losing some of their social independence as their single status made

80. *The Coventry Leet Book*, ed. Mary Dormer Harris, 2 vols., Early English Text Society, orig. ser., nos. 134-35, 138, 146 (London, 1907-13), 544-45, cited in Goldberg, “Women,” 120.

81. Merry Wiesner, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 62.

82. *Ibid.*

them vulnerable to charges of immorality. The single working woman had become a suspect figure.

Women and Dramatic Activity

This loss of female economic power and growing restrictions on women's societal roles suggest that the objections to the Marian pageants may have gone beyond religious concerns about their content. Gardiner argues that their early excision demonstrates that "the spirit of Protestantism was at work toward the 'reformation' of the religious drama."⁸³ Certainly, many Protestant reformers saw the pageants as idolatrous because they represented religious figures on stage. The pageants about the Virgin Mary would have been particularly offensive to Reformation sensibilities for a number of reasons. Veneration of Mary, like veneration of other saints, diverted worship from God to "false idols," and because Mary's influence in England was great, reformers were particularly concerned about worship of her. The nature of Mary's relationship to Christ was also problematic. Mary's role as mother of Christ implied that she had a mother's authority over her divine son, and her ability to intercede with her son on the behalf of sinners deflected praise away from God to Mary herself. In an England already, perhaps, struggling with masculine identity under a female monarch, the biblical pageants about Mary, with their portrayal of a powerful Virgin Mary, were thus likely to be subject to the censure of reformers.

Yet, the pageants may have been seen as particularly objectionable for reasons beyond Protestant objections to idolatry. Not only were these three pageants unusual in their focus on a strong female character, Mary, but all three were also produced by crafts most associated with women in a time when there were increasing restrictions on women. While women may not have played a large public role in the craft guilds of the weavers, drapers, and hostillers, all three of the crafts relied heavily on female labor particularly throughout the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries as plague losses increased the labor demand. These crafts were thus more likely to be associated with women workers than were

83. Gardiner, *Mysteries' End*, 61.

most other crafts. A confluence of factors in the late medieval period, the decline in the cloth trade in York and the changing views of the proper role of women, changed this more favorable work environment for women. With the decline of the wool trade in northern England, the demand for labor decreased, and the number of women working in the crafts declined. At the same time, Protestant ideology stressed that the proper sphere of the woman was within the household, and as a result, the single working woman became suspect. These crafts were thus dually plagued. They were experiencing economic decline and were associated with working women at a time when the working woman was increasingly seen as problematic.

This left these pageants particularly vulnerable to suppression. After the suppression of the pageants, the weavers, perhaps the strongest of the three guilds, briefly took over the woolpackers' "Supper at Emmaeus," and this is perhaps a sign of the strength of their guild relative to the woolpackers, drapers, and hostillers.⁸⁴ But the reprieve was only temporary. None of these guilds had the economic power they had wielded in the previous century, and none compared to the economic or political power of guilds like the mercers. Because their content was so objectionable to Reformation theology, it is perhaps unlikely that the pageants about Mary would have survived even if they had been performed by more powerful guilds. Yet perhaps had these guilds not suffered both from economic loss and from increasing social restrictions on their members, they might have better defended their pageants or more successfully usurped those of other, less powerful guilds. The end of the pageants of the Virgin also marked the end of an era for women as economic powers in York.

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84. *HB f. H* (14 April 1553) *REED York* 1:307.